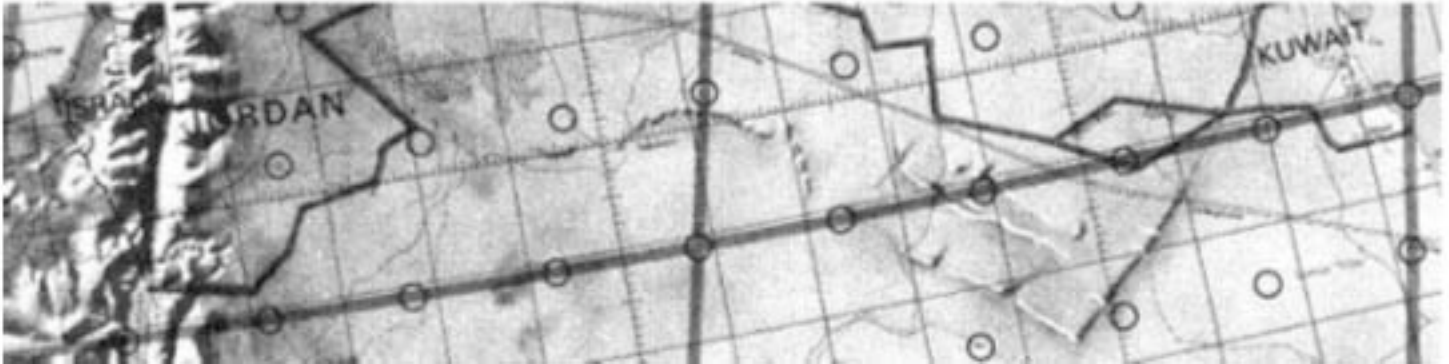


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Russia's Muslim Strategy *by Walter Laqueur*

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Islam is “Russia’s fate.”

This was the prediction made a few years ago by Aleksei Malashenko, one of Russia’s leading (and most reliable) experts on Islam. This may be an exaggeration, but perhaps not by much.

Demography is also Russia’s fate; if the situation and the prospects were less critical, Islam would be less of a threat. With equal justice it could be said that Russia’s historical misfortune (and fate) are its obsession with imaginary dangers and neglect of real ones. Stalin, it will be recalled, trusted no one, especially not old Bolsheviks, but he was certain that Hitler would not attack the Soviet Union. It is a fascinating syndrome, and one that has again become crucial with the reemergence of Russia as an important player in world politics.

And an important player it is. It took Germany a mere fifteen years after defeat in the First World War to reappear as a major power on the global scene. It took Russia about the same time to reemerge after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. The reemergence was made possible, above all, by the boom in the price of raw materials such as oil and gas, which Russia has in abundance. Despite all the violent ups and downs in the world economy, the demand for these raw materials will continue to be a source of strength for Russia. At the same time, the new Russia con-

fronts major domestic and external challenges that did not exist (or did not exist to the same extent) before. Russia's future depends upon how well it copes with them.

One of the main challenges facing Russia is its relationship with Islam, both on the internal front and in foreign policy. It would certainly be too much to say that the Russian leadership and public opinion have failed to recognize this, but the full importance of the issue has not been appreciated. The reasons are not shrouded in secrecy: it is the deeply-rooted belief that America, and the West in general, constitute the main peril facing Russia in the past, present and the foreseeable future.

In fact, Russia and the West share certain common interests in the Middle East and the Muslim world in general. But a realization of this truth collides with the new Russian doctrine as it has developed in recent years, according to which Muslim countries are Russia's natural allies in the inevitable and perennial confrontation with the West. This ongoing debate, largely ignored in Western capitals, forms the subject of this paper.

Resistance, romance, neglect

The Russian encounter with Islam dates back many centuries. In parts of Russia, Islam appeared on the scene before Christianity. Just as Europe was under pressure from the Ottoman Empire for centuries, Russia was threatened by Muslim powers from both the east and south. While the danger to Europe abated after the defeat of the Ottomans before Vienna in 1689, the

decisive date for Moscow was 1552 when Ivan IV (the Terrible) occupied Kazan and shortly thereafter the whole middle Volga region. But the still-powerful Crimean Khanate raided southern Russia for many more years, and in 1571 occupied and burned Moscow.

However, once the wars with the Ottoman empire lost their importance, and the Tsarist empire established itself firmly from the Prussian border to Vladivostok, Russians gave little thought to their relations with Muslim minorities inside Russia and with neighboring Muslim countries. The Russian conquest of the Caucasus inspired two generations of Russian writers from Pushkin and Lermontov to Tolstoi, but it seemed to be just another colonial war, comparable to similar wars fought by other imperial powers. It was the attraction of a strange and exotic world that inspired them, comparable perhaps in some ways to Kipling's fascination with India. There was the occasional hostile or contemptuous remark, such as Lermontov's famous lullaby about the evil Chechen with his *kinzhal* (big dagger) crawling about the house, obviously up to no good. The fact that

Lermontov had called one of his fellow officers a *goretz* (Muslim highlander) led to the duel in which he lost his life. But by and large, these were the exceptions. Griboedov, one of the greatest Russian writers of his day (and a diplomat), was killed by a fanatical mob in the Russian embassy in Tehran. This, though sadly received, did by no means generate Islamophobia, as it was considered



more or less normal behavior in less civilized countries.

Islam as a religion and a spiritual influence hardly preoccupied the Russian Orthodox Church. Russian philosophical and religious thinkers of the nineteenth century such as Chaadayev, and the Slavophiles Chomyakov and Solovev, occasionally mentioned Islam in their works, but they were not very well-informed about the subject and most of what they wrote was speculation. The Moscow man in the street hardly encountered Islam except perhaps when meeting his janitor; among them, Tatars were strongly represented.

Resistance against Russian domination continued on a local scale, but it was suppressed by the central authorities without much difficulty. Examples include the Central Asia rebellion in 1916, when about one-third of the Kyrgyz people fled to China; and the Basmachi campaign after the Bolshevik takeover, which last almost seven years. These were considered events of limited local importance—tensions inevitable in the relationship between colonial powers and their subjects.

It was widely believed among Western observers in the 1930s and even after the Second World War, that the Soviet Union, whatever its other shortcomings, had succeeded in solving the national question. This was the consensus that emerged from the books of experts such as Hans Kohn and Walter Kolmarz. Hannah Arendt shared their view. The impression was not mistaken—up to a point. Soviet power had managed to win over sections of the native political elite and to educate a new intelligentsia which accepted the

official Communist ideology. This local intelligentsia had been integrated and given leading positions in their republics. Some had even been accepted in the center of power, just as the Caucasian aristocracy had been socially and politically accepted in Tsarist St. Petersburg and Moscow.

But the general inertia and stagnation (*zastoi*) of the 1970s and 1980s also had strong repercussion in the Muslim regions. Brezhnev, who tried to evade conflict whenever possible, upbraided the Central Asians on more than one occasion for not pulling their weight, and for depending on economic and other assistance from the center which could ill afford it, thus becoming more and more of a burden.

Post-Soviet stress

The breakdown of the Soviet Union aggravated the situation, when it appeared that the often-invoked friendship of the peoples (*druzhiba narodov*) was not, to put it mildly, deeply rooted. Many millions of ethnic Russians left the Central Asian republics, where they were made to feel unsafe and unwanted.

The major Muslim republics became politically independent, but in many other respects their dependence on Moscow continued or became even stronger. The quality of the new leadership was bad, and the ideology that had faded was partly replaced by Islam and Islamism, spearheaded by emissaries from Saudi Arabia and other Arab and Muslim countries. They built hundreds of new mosques, launched various religious-nationalist organizations, and reorganized the *hadj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca (albeit at the modest level of about 20,000 pilgrims a year).

The Moscow central authorities tolerated this influx of foreign money and ideas, partly because their main preoccupations were elsewhere, partly because they felt powerless to intervene. The KGB does seem to have been concerned about the spread of “Wahhabi” influence, particularly in the northern Caucasus, and also the appearance of other radical Muslim sects and movements such as Hizb al-Tahrir. According to some reports, the KGB (now FSB) established some Islamist groupings of its own in order to be better informed about the activities of these circles.

The religious-political reawakening of Islam (and often of radical Islam) coincided with the growth of a radical nationalist mood among the Russian population. This had partly to do with the influx of Muslims in the major Russian cities. Greater Moscow is reportedly now the home of close to two million Muslims (many of them illegal residents); it is certainly the European city with the largest Muslim population. In

In the 1990s, individual attacks against Muslims in these cities led to Muslim complaints about the “demonization of Islam” and, as in Western Europe, growing Islamophobia. In truth, the attacks were usually turf wars in or around local markets, but there is no denying that the very presence of so many alien newcomers generated hostility and xenophobia.

While the Russian security services worried mainly about the subversive and separatist

character of radical Islam, the Russian foreign ministry was preoccupied with the foreign political impact of anti-Muslim sentiments on Russia’s relations with the neighboring Muslim countries. Following the initiative of the then-foreign minister Evgeni Primakov, the Russian ministry of foreign affairs arranged a high-level conference in 1998 devoted to damage control. (Primakov had started his career as an Arabist and later rose to the highest positions in the state apparatus and the KGB.) The reputation of Russia in the Muslim world was already at a low point due to the Afghan war and the first Chechen war (1994-96). To repair some of the damage, the foreign ministry argued that if Islamophobia were to grow in Russia, this would be a fatal blow to the Russian traditional of tolerance and integrity. In truth, they were worried lest Russia be isolated and possibly miss political opportunities in the Muslim world.



However, anti-Russian sentiments were by no means universal in the Muslim world, despite the impact of the Afghan and Chechen wars. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (to give but one example) refused on more than one occasion to accord membership to Ichkeria, the political organization of the Chechen rebels. Once Russia withdrew from Afghanistan, it ceased to be a target of both Muslim propaganda and military (terrorist) action. There were individual cases of anti-

Russian propaganda and even some sporadic, half-hearted preparations for terrorist action (for instance against Russian diplomats in Iraq). But there was very little general Muslim solidarity with Russian Muslims and their political demands. Likewise, Russian Muslims showed little interest in the affairs of their coreligionists in other countries. An appeal to contribute money to the victims of the Gaza campaign in 2009 yielded 100,000 rubles, not an impressive sum considering the presence of more than 20 million Muslims in Russia.

During the 1990s, something akin to a Russian strategy vis-à-vis Islam developed. Russia had abandoned old illusions of a close alliance with the “progressive” Arab countries, such as had prevailed in earlier decades. It was well remembered that Arab countries had seldom if ever paid for massive Russian arms deliveries, which certainly did not generate political support. But the idea that Russia could play the role of a mediator between the West (above all America) and the Muslim world began to take root. So Moscow did not approve of the first, let alone the second Iraq war; it tried to mediate in the Tadjik civil war (which would have petered out anyway after more than 100,000 people were killed); it made certain suggestions in the context of the Iranian nuclear program (which led to nothing); and in 2006 it invited the Hamas leadership to Moscow. Neither Hamas nor Hezbollah are now included in the list of terrorist organizations of the Russian intelligence services.

It did not take long for the Russian leadership to realize that such attempts at mediation failed to produce tangible results or generate any benefit to Russia. Nevertheless, low-

level contacts continued, perhaps to demonstrate that Russia was still interested in the Middle East and had to be regarded as a major player. Moscow continued to argue that Iran could be persuaded not to use its nuclear installations for military purposes, even though there was little factual evidence to this effect. In 2007, the Hamas foreign minister Mahmud Zahhar paid another visit to Moscow, without any tangible results. The only benefit accruing to Russia as the result of its mediation was that Muslim countries refrained from giving open support to fellow Muslims inside Russia—much to the disappointment of the Islamists within Russia.

In brief, Moscow followed a strategy of mediation without attaching great hopes to it. On many occasions, Russia emphasized its respect for Islam, the Muslim countries and their leaders, as well as the need to promote reconciliation between different cultures and civilizations. At the same time, there was mutual distrust and the deep-seated conviction that any rapprochement with the Muslim world could only be of a tactical character. Quite obviously the Muslim countries would not have launched a campaign against Russia (just as they refrained from doing so against China and India), even had Russia not cast itself as “honest broker.” Russia is a major nuclear power, as are China and India, and these considerations are decisive.

The Muslim landscape

Russia’s internal Muslim problems are no doubt of greater political importance than its relations with foreign Muslim countries. Russian attitudes towards its Muslim minorities are full of contradictions, probably inevitably so. Moscow insists on absolute loyalty

on the part of its Muslim citizens, but cannot and does not want to fulfill many of the demands of even the more moderate elements among the Muslims.

This refers above all to the Muslim republics on the middle Volga such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. They have a measure of autonomy but want much more. The present rulers and political elite date back to the Soviet period: Murtaza Rakhomov and Mintimer Shaimiev, the political bosses of the two republics, both in their seventies, began their careers in the Communist era, gained the Order of Lenin and similar distinctions, and have been in command since 1991 and 1993 respectively. They actually belonged to the orthodox wing of the Communist party, which was opposed to the Gorbachev reforms.

The economic situation in these two highly industrialized regions is better than in most other parts of the Russian federation, largely thanks to the oil industry and its various branches. Nevertheless (or because of it), they have made growing political and economic demands of Moscow. The idea that the first deputy prime minister (or president) of the Russian Federation should be a Muslim seems to have originated in the Volga region. Political separatism has few prospects here:

Tatarstan and Bashkortostan are cut off from the other Muslim regions, the Russian ethnic element is strong in both republics (almost half in Tatarstan—more in the major cities such as Kazan and Ufa), and there have been many mixed marriages. The Bashkirs are a minority in their republic, and the Muslims amount to a majority only if the Tatar sector is added. However, the relations between the two ethnic groups has not always been smooth. The influence of modernist Islam (*jadidism*) remains strong, and there has been, and continues to be, criticism of and even contempt for fundamentalist Islam. (“We do not want to return to the middle ages.”) Opposition to Moscow is based more on nationalist than religious grounds.

The second major concentration of Russian Muslims is Moscow. Estimates of their number vary greatly—between 1.5 and 2 million—but walking the Moscow street their massive presence is unmistakable. Whole quarters of the capital have been taken over by them, such as Butovo in the far south, but also regions near the big official and unofficial markets. There are many new mosques (among them four or five truly big ones), Muslim cultural clubs, hospitals, schools, kindergartens, food shops and even a supermarket named Appelsina claiming to be on



the European level. It is announced that more will be opened soon. There are no major bookshops as yet and no Muslim Russian newspapers, but there is a great deal of activity on the Internet. (The works of Sayyid Qutb, Mawdudi and other radical Muslim thinkers have been translated and can be obtained without difficulty.) The authorities have been trying to expel the illegals of whom there are a great many, closing down some of the major markets. (This was directed not only against Muslims but also against Chinese, other Asians and “people of Caucasian background” in general.)

On the other hand, Luzhkov, the influential Moscow mayor, has gone out of his way to gain popularity among the Muslim residents, allocating funds for some of their religious and cultural institutions (which remain firmly under the observation of the KGB). Perhaps more important, Putin and Medvedev have done the same, sending greetings to the Muslim community on the occasion of their holidays and even visiting one or another major mosque. Such practices, aimed at the domestication of Islam would have been unthinkable ten or even five years ago, and they reflect the growing importance of the Muslim presence in the capital.

Northern Caucasus is the third and most dangerous Muslim concentration. The basic facts are well known and need not be reiterated in detail. Some 160,000 soldiers and civilians are be-



lieved to have perished in the two Chechen wars. Eventually, Russia succeeded in imposing a solution (for the time being), and relative calm prevails. Grozny, the heavily destroyed capital, is being rebuilt. Chechnya has become a partly autonomous Muslim region in which the Sharia is the law of the land; the local authorities have been pressing for the legalization of polygamy.

To what extent the new Chechen leadership believes in fundamentalist Islam is by no means clear; more likely they feel the need for an official ideology that could serve as a uniting force, and at the same time counteract the accusations of the rebels that the members of the ruling pro-Putin clique are apostates, hostile to Islam. The rebels, who suffered heavy blows, not only hate the Russian occupiers but also bitterly attack America (which they claim supports Russian oppression) and denounce the Jews (the source of all global evil). However, not all the declarations attributed to the Chechen opposition on the Internet can be taken at face value; Russian black propaganda seems to be at work.

Nevertheless, the Russian policy of appointing more or less trustworthy satraps such as the younger Kadyrov offers no guarantee as far as the future is concerned. Moscow is quite aware that their local representatives will press for more and more independence (and money), are difficult to control and, in the final analysis, cannot be trusted.

The end of the

Chechen war brought no peace to other parts of the northern Caucasus. On the contrary, attacks by Islamist gangs against the authorities in Daghestan, Ingushetia and other republics and regions increased in 2009, resulting in the killing of police chiefs and other leading officials. In June 2009, Yunusbek Yevkurov, president of Ingushetia, narrowly escaped death in an attack in which he was injured. The situation was deemed sufficiently serious for Medvedev to visit Daghestan (for the second time in one year) and Ingushetia. It is thought that no Russian president has ever done that before.

No solution seems to be in sight for stabilizing the situation in northern Caucasus, partly because of the continuing attacks of the jihadists, but also because there seems to be an inherent, traditional inclination towards long wars in the region. And if there is no outside enemy, Caucasians seem to enjoy fighting one other.¹ There are some forty nationalities and thirty languages in Daghestan alone, and the situation in other parts of the region is not very different. During the Soviet era the conflicts were suppressed. Now the Islamists may believe that if they could only succeed in defeating Russia militarily and expelling the Russian civilians, they might impose their own pax Islamica on the region.

The middle Volga region and the Caucasus apart, Russia confronts radical Islam in the former Muslim republics of the Soviet Union in Central Asia and, to a lesser degree, Azerbaijan.

Russia keeps a close watch over Central Asia. If radical Islam were to take over political power in these republics or even only one or two of them, this would be a major disaster for Russia, which considers this vast region an integral part of its "privileged zone of influence." Radical Islam has attempted to gain a strong foothold in a variety of ways. The high tide of the activities of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which joined forces with the Taliban, was between 1999 and 2004. Hizb al-Tahrir began to send its emissaries even earlier. (It was banned in Russia in 2003 and is banned now in most other republics, but probably maintains small underground cells.) Their campaigns were defeated by often brutal repression, and of late there have been relatively few terrorist attacks. There is reason to assume that radical Islam has struck root in at least some regions, but it is difficult if not impossible for outsiders to know how deep these roots run and what forces the jihadists could mobilize.

In addition to the extremist opposition to the Central Asian governments, there are more moderate forces also opposed to the authorities, and it would be wrong not to differentiate between these two forces. Moderate opposition arises from the fact that local governments are authoritarian (only in Tadjikistan is the opposition represented in parliament), corrupt and fairly inefficient. It could be argued that Central Asia has never experienced good, efficient and incorrupt rule, and that, as in many other countries, nothing can work in these places without at least a modi-

¹ A personal note of recollection: I first visited the northern Caucasus four times between 1957 and 1966, and was one of the first foreigners to be admitted to this region. The strongest impression gained during these visits (apart from the magnificent landscape—Switzerland without the tourists) was the tension between the nationalities, even if this seldom found open expression.

cum of corruption. However, there are degrees of corruption, and at time of acute economic crisis these republics could be vulnerable to Islamist movements pretending to combine the orthodox practice of the true faith with honesty and greater efficiency.

A new Russian doctrine?

If Russia has an overall strategy vis-à-vis Islam and the Muslim world, it is replete with contradictions and can be understood only within the framework of how Russians see their place in the world now and in the years ahead. There is the constant contradiction between a feeling of worthlessness and the sentiment of superiority, of having a mission to fulfill. Worthlessness found its classical formulation in Chaadayev's *Philosophical Letters* (1836): we had neither a Renaissance nor an Enlightenment, we have contributed nothing to world culture, we have not added a single idea, but we disfigured everything we touched. We belong neither to West nor to East. Chaadayev was declared a madman by the Tsar who sent him his doctor several times a week. But Chaadayev's diagnosis has influenced Russian thinking to this day and is frequently quoted.

On the other hand, there is the feeling of superiority, the view of Russia as the Third Rome possessed of a unique mission in the world. These feelings of mission were not prominently voiced during the late Soviet period or the decade after, but with the economic recovery they became not just respectable but achieved almost the status of an official ideology.

Similar contradictions abound in relations with the Muslim world. On the one hand, there is the conviction that Russia ought to

strive for an alliance with the Islamic countries or at least some of them (above all Turkey and Iran—the Arab countries usually figure last and Pakistan does not figure at all). On the other hand, a deep distrust prevails: Putin's "Russia has only two reliable allies, its infantry and its artillery" (the saying was borrowed from Tsar Alexander III).

The fading and discrediting of Marxism-Leninism have required a new doctrine. (Marx is hardly ever quoted these days and Lenin only seldom. Stalin had a major comeback but as a Russian patriot, not as a Marxist.) The new Russian doctrine has many facets and it ranges from the relatively sober to the obscure, farfetched and bizarre (which suddenly became respectable) to the clinically mad.

To begin with the last: Yuri Petukhov, recently deceased, was a widely read science fiction writer. Shortly before his demise he formulated his political views and prophecies in *Russkii mirovoi porjadok* (The Russian World Order). According to him, all foreigners are Neanderthals and degenerates (the term appears a thousand times in his book), Europe and America were created by Russians and should be repossessed, all Russian leaders including Lenin and Khrushchev (a weakling who did not dare to go to war over Cuba) were traitors. Only the great Stalin is an exception. Hitler was a romantic, the First and



Second World Wars were unleashed by the treacherous Americans and the British, Pearl Harbor was a magnificent operation, and so on. The American degenerates, in collaboration with the European jackals, want to destroy Russia, and caused the Chernobyl nuclear explosion of 1986.

Petukhov expressed the thoughts and feeling of not a few simpleminded compatriots. Alexander Dugin and Igor Panarin operate on a more sophisticated level. Few took them seriously a decade or so ago, but more recently they have become respectable and even influential within the Kremlin (reportedly through Vladislav Surkov, Putin's political mastermind).

Dugin began his ideological odyssey in the ranks of Pamyat, the ultra-right anti-Semitic group in the last days of Soviet rule. When he realized that such primitive and outdated views had no political future, he established his own school. Panarin, on the other hand, originally belonged to the liberal dissidents but later made his way to the other end of the political spectrum. He became known in the West following his prediction that America would not exist beyond 2010. There would be a civil war and the country would be divided into six separate states.

Dugin (pictured right) seems to enjoy considerable respect among the military, the media and even in academic circles, whereas Panarin's influence is mainly felt in academe and the foreign ministry academy. Dugin tried for many years to



present a synthetic new ideology, a mixture of some of the more disreputable Western elements (Italian neo-fascism in the style of Julius Evola, the new right of Alain de Benoist in France, and neo-Nazi geopolitics). He later realized the need for some specific Russian elements and adopted an updated version of Eurasianism, an ideology first developed in the 1920s among Russian émigrés.

The Eurasian idea, in one form or another, is widely spread among Russian political elite. One example is *Put voinov Allakha: Islam i politika Rossii* (The Road of Allah's Warriors: Islam and Russian Politics), a basic text at the Russian Military Academy and the university of the security services. The book was authored by Zhuraviev, Melkov and General Shershnev, all of them teachers at these institutions. They regard Islamist separatism a major threat to the survival of Russia and have no sympathy for countries which have adopted the Sharia and sponsor jihadism. But when it comes to strategies of how to confront these dangers, the message is *ex oriente lux*: the world has to turn to the East rather than the West for inspiration and leadership to find a way of salvation.

Since Russia alone is not strong enough to counteract American and European influence, an alliance of Russia, China, India and Iran (called RIKI) is envisaged. (The authors, otherwise not distinguished by a sense of humor, mention that they are aware of Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, the heroic mongoose in Kipling's *Jungle Book*.) These countries behaved very well in the past, and did not exploit the decade of Russian weakness after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the RIKI countries are also religiously close to each

other: Russian ethics are close to Asian ethics and have nothing in common with the capitalist and usurious Protestant ethic as described by Benjamin Franklin and Max Weber. The authors also note that Catholicism is a far greater danger to Russia than Islam—thus contradicting their earlier claim that Islam is a major menace.

Seen in this light, RIKI would become not only the leading political and military global factor, but also the moral leader of the world. These are ambitious plans, especially considering that they involve countries that have very little in common and in fact deeply distrust one another. Russia and China, China and India, Iran and the rest of the world, show no great eagerness to collaborate too closely and are among the most corrupt in the world. Yet this is the geopolitical world view conveyed to the trainees of the military forces and the state security services.

Russia blinded

The nationalist right-wingers, both moderate and extremist, agree that the United States and its European allies are Russia's most dangerous enemies by far. The fact that the Soviet Union lost out in the Cold War and eventually collapsed seemed to confirm Russian fears. This has shaped Russian strategy to the present day, and probably will do so in the foreseeable future. Even if the more extreme fantasies about American intrigues and crimes are not shared by the mainstream Russian establishment, the preoccupation with America has blinded large sections of the Russian elite to other threats facing their country.

Foremost among these is demographic decline: the shrinking of Russia. The political

repercussions of this disaster are far from fully clear among those shaping Russian policy, both vis-à-vis the Muslim minority at home and Islam in Russian foreign policy. Islam expert Malashenko, for example, believes that neither in the short term nor by 2050 will there be any reason to speak of the Islamization of Russia. Other observers take a less sanguine view, often drawing attention to the ethnic background of the recruits to the Russian army, which is increasingly of Muslim origin. In any case, it is not just a matter of statistics. Much depends from the measure of integration of national and religious minorities in Russia: will they be loyal to regime or will the separatist trends become stronger?

The Russian authorities, while strictly observing developments inside the Muslim communities (and intervening when necessary), are trying to keep their Muslims content and prevent national strife (“Islamophobia”). But they face the growing xenophobia promoted by the Russian right, and popular opinion in general (“Russia for the Russians”). The Russian Orthodox Church likewise follows what they regard as official appeasement of Islam with grave misgivings. They want to preserve their old/new status as the state religion, and while the Kremlin is vitally interested in good relations with the Orthodox Church, it finds it increasingly difficult to pursue a balancing act between the Orthodox and Islam. Appeals for a dialogue between the religions are mere eyewash; there is no such readiness to talk on either side.

The Caucasus remains Russia's soft underbelly and no solution is in sight. Most of the action has shifted from Chechnya to Daghes-

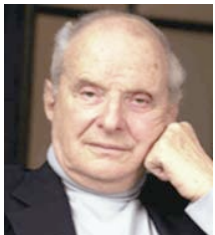
tan, Ingushetia and some of the other regions. Daghestan is very poor, and an independent Daghestan without constant help from Russia could hardly exist. But such economic considerations will not stop the fighting; the rebels can always argue that they aim at a united northern Caucasus. This may be no more than wishful thinking, but useful as a powerful myth while the fighting continues. Russian policy will continue as before: brutal repression of separatism and the imposition of a leadership considered trustworthy by Moscow (and collaborationist by jihadists).

Otherwise, Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis Islam and Islamism has been undecided, trying to keep all options open. With America still looming as the great threat, Islamist anti-

American activities should have been welcomed without reservation (and often were), but there seem to have been doubts of late about the wisdom of such a policy. The Kremlin may follow the misfortunes of the West in Afghanistan with *schadenfreude*, but if the United States and NATO were to withdraw from Afghanistan, it would again become a Russian problem as a base for jihadist activities in Central Asia.

Still, regime strategy is dominated by the American shadow and the conviction that what helps the United States must be bad for Russia. This appears strange if Islam should indeed be “Russia’s fate.” But it may take a long time for Russia to unlearn its obsession with the West. ••

Walter Laqueur



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